

# Farm hopes, crops slowly wilting away

*Drought-wis.*

By Joe Beck

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TOWN OF SPRINGDALE — Howard Dahlk has never seen a drought like it in 25 years of farming.

Each step he takes stirs a tiny dust cloud around his feet as he strolls into the fields and contemplates rows of stunted cornstalks and stands of sun-blasted alfalfa.

"Right now, that's all you think about it," he said. "What you should do and trying to make the right decision."

The powdery dust clouds underfoot punctuate his desolate musings like exclamation marks.

Howard Dahlk is a plain man caught in an extraordinary time. The drought that vexes him may be the worst since the 1930s by some people's reckoning. In a season when rain has been mostly a rumor, Dahlk's farm, like thousands of others, is running on hope, endurance and the willingness of the owner to sacrifice.

In a normal year, Dahlk, 40, would have spent last week sawing off the remnants of the first crop of hay. The first crop was down about 40 percent this year and there probably won't be a second crop without rain in the next week or so.

Wisconsin, the nation's largest alfalfa producer, has lost 25 percent to 50 percent of its first crop, and in many cases the second crop will be decimated, according to estimates from university, state, and federal experts. In Dane County, the alfalfa loss is estimated at \$3 million. Second crop losses could send the total to \$5 million.

Money doesn't grow on trees and

## The Great DROUGHT OF 1988



### SPECIAL REPORT

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neither do most crops in the Midwest. They grow in fields and how they grow says a lot about how much money a farmer earns and how much a consumer pays in the supermarket.

"Farming," Dahlk said, "is the only business where you buy retail and sell wholesale."

The long journey from the field to the supermarket checkout line begins in the spring with the purchase of materials needed to plant and preserve crops until harvest. Some land may also be rented. Dahlk and his two brothers own 60 acres and rent another 35 in operating their Twin

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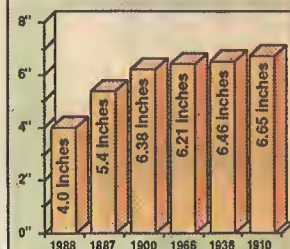
State Journal photos/L. ROGER TURNER

Howard Dahlk, of rural Verona, inspects a cornfield that is being withered away by the heat.



Dahlk, like many farmers, worries there will not be enough feed for his cattle this winter.

## Drought of 1988 one for the records



SOURCE: State climatologist